

IMMUNIZING STRATEGIES: HIP-HOP AND CRITIQUE IN TANZANIA

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Hip-hop stands for the fashion and the music genre of rap that originated some thirty years ago from African American inner-city culture. The raw accounts of life at the periphery of society raised political awareness, just as the civil rights movement had done before. Today hip-hop permeates popular culture. Rap music tops the charts world-wide. Mainstream pop music has adopted its vocal style and streetwise attitude. These exhibit what Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) famously called the 'realistic dissidence' the culture industry thrives on. Such dissidence keeping the status quo intact has recently come to include 'gangsta rap'. The lyrics and videos of this relatively new hip-hop style from the USA glorify inner-city crime and extravagant consumption, stripping capitalism to its bare essence while leaving all irony behind. The political ideals that initially characterized US hip-hop music are replaced by a show of predatory sexuality and of power for its own sake. In a surprising analogy, a similar cynicism, or pragmatic of predation, has been observed by Mbembe (1992) and Bayart (1993) among the postcolonial elite in Africa. Their analyses, I argue, belong to a type of social critique that has been perfected in Tanzania's vibrant hip-hop scene, known as Bongo Flava, literally 'flavour of the brains'.

Bongo, 'the brains', is our main lead to discern the close affinity between Tanzanian political history and hip-hop. The word originally referred to the cunning needed to live in a city like Dar es Salaam and to cope with the cynicism of wages so low they presuppose additional income from illicit schemes, informal economy (Tripp 1997) or farming at the periphery of town (Flynn 2001). Bongo, by which name Dar es Salaam used to be known, has by now come to stand for the whole country, at times black Africa. The term also figures in the Swahili credo of the streets: *chemsha bongo*, 'boil' or activate 'the brains'. The affinity with rap's ghetto discourse of survival is striking. We recognize the harsh law of the streets under a failing state, famously expressed in Kinshasa's Article 15 (*Débrouillez-vous*). The pioneering hit by Hard Blasters, with the same title *Chemsha bongo*, graphically details the survival prostitution of *kaka poa* ('cool brothers', male prostitutes) and *machangu doa* (female prostitutes) who populate the inner city. The life of street children or *toto za kona*, kids of the corner, is contrasted with that of the city's happy few or *toto za geti*, kids of the gate. A recurring

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figure in the songs to describe urban competition and dissipating public service is the young bus-tout or *konda*, 'the meagre one'. Taking up as little valuable space as possible, the *konda* suspends all rules of respect, stuffing passengers into an overcrowded bus to keep up with the merciless race for cash. Anyone who has travelled in Africa will remember those touts showing off with their money-bills while holding on to the lurching van in contempt of death.

However, through such archetypes illustrating the harsh law of the streets, Bongo Flava questions that law. Contrary to the infamous Article 15, 'to boil the brains' also means to know where the limits are, 'to keep it real'. That version of the law revives the political exploration by former President Nyerere, known as *Mwalimu* or 'the teacher'. One of his preoccupations was the acquisitiveness of politicians, which he believed could be constrained by freedom of speech. The contrast is not far-fetched with neighbouring Congo, where Mobutu ruled in the full sense of a 'chief' (versus Nyerere making his name in the villages by abolishing chieftaincy) and where the music scene still predominantly serves escapism (hip-hop being virtually absent). According to this logic, it is no coincidence either that the one African country with a track record in hip-hop comparable to that of Tanzania is Senegal. It had Léopold Senghor, another founding president belonging to the grandparental past of visionary socialism.¹ A positive model of leadership, we will discover, provides the rapper with a powerful ancestral spirit to haunt the ruling elite.

Emerging in the early 1990s and booming in the last five years, Bongo Flava has become the primary informal channel to publicly ventilate social discontent. The lyrics critically assess the post-socialist generation presently in charge and suggest the rise of a 'new generation' (*kizazi kipya*) that would be the rightful heir to the legacy of Nyerere and other African leaders who fought for independence. The latter have their equivalent in the hip-hop world: the first African American rap bands such as Public Enemy, who promoted the utopia of a 'Nation of Islam' representing all black Americans. Public Enemy spoke for a 'revolutionary generation', sensing that 'There is something changing in the kind of consciousness on this planet today' (from their album *Fear of a Black Planet* 1990). They knew rap's potential to give voice to a movement (Eure and Spady 1991), an *élan* (Virolle 1996: 126). Today their music is respected as 'old school', meaning that its style and content are seminal but outdated. Nyerere's idealism likewise lacks the sophistication of the politics that succeeded it. The shift to predatory pragmatics has a streetwise quality hard to outwit, as it responds to social inequality with personal enrichment. Of particular relevance to political scientists is how the logic of popular culture (of what is 'in' and what is 'out') has compelled Tanzanian hip-hop to consider the merit of both gangsta rapper and postcolonial elite in overcoming the naïve

¹ In August 2003, radio station Live365 broadcast a series of duels between Senegalese and Tanzanian crews to honour the originality of these two hip-hop scenes.

ideals of predecessors. Any critique that does not at least have this merit will prove futile, that is, fail to be taken seriously by the population at large. Africanists here discover an issue which African American studies knows from debating gangsta rap's damage to the cause of African Americans (Boyd 2003; Kitwana 2003; Neal 2002): how to engage in social critique without committing the error of claiming moral superiority? This article discusses the relevance of that question in the complex Tanzanian context. The cogency of moral indifference has compelled local artists to be cunning and to develop rhetorical counter-strategies that may well be of global relevance.

Tanzanian rappers, I argue, immunize themselves against the suspicion of moralism (and thus keep their streetwise status) by attributing the criticized practices to survival needs they share too. The lyrics' overall picture is one of pessimism, which paradoxically reinforces the listener's decision power. The discursively complex position of invoking the impasse is preferred over projecting the causes of poverty, corruption and epidemic on a singular other. The artists' profoundly multicultural background may have contributed to that. Not unlike the rest of the continent, Tanzania has more than 120 linguistic groups cohabiting. They populate old trading routes from Congo to the Indian Ocean. A German as well as British colonization has been combined with a long-standing Arab and Indian presence. With independence came the socialist party's experiments in national awareness, followed in the mid-1980s by a 'near-180-degree change of ideological direction' (Dashwood and Pratt 1999: 239). We should not be surprised if the resulting art (mostly oral in the East African tradition) is multi-layered, original, and germane to other parts of the world. In Bongo Flava, colonial power appears as but one historical agent. Whereas scholars choose to speak for the subaltern and expose 'the colonial difference' in the world-view of Eurocentric others (for instance in the Latin American context; Mignolo 2000), Tanzanian rappers observe the multiplication of oppositions and lay bare the resulting *postcolonial indifference* that has affected all layers of society. In the African context, the composite post-colonial in-difference refers not to a lack but to an excess of differences. What rappers combat is to have this inflation evacuate the meaning of difference. Rather than building hybrid identities of 'afro-modernity' (Hanchard 1999), they register the heterogeneity within their society, including antagonisms with ruling elites, with wealthier cultural groups and with emigrating peers. Rather than outlining a black counterculture against neo-colonial empires (Gilroy 1994), they see cultural affinities cutting across the African diaspora, for instance in the judgement on gangsta hip-hop. Adding to the complexity, former colonizers have become desirable. Tanzanian artists are aware of these ambivalent feelings precluding a singular, clear opposition. As the recent hit song of Gangwe Mobb goes, Tanzanians live with 'the outside inside' (*nje ndani*). The desire to emigrate is not attributed to the country's poor business or farming prospects but to the chimera that 'outside', in Europe or the USA, lies the short cut to gaining respect. Thanks to school and media, the outside literally stays 'in the womb' (*ndani*) of the

postcolony's inhabitants, as a difference too resilient to hybridize.² In short, these African artists expect more benefit from acknowledging the impasse, the political indifference and damaged self-image, than from offering yet another utopia.

Bongo Flava refers to every Tanzanian as *mbongo*, a 'cunning' person. The social context described is that of corruption and HIV infection steadily proliferating. As if treating a widely spread virus, the rap lyrics spare nobody in the analysis, not even the rapper him- or herself. This approach will recall Achille Mbembe's (1992, 2001) portrayal of the African power holism which unites the rulers and the ruled, and which surpasses Western oppositionality such as that between dominance and resistance. His analysis has been called Afro-pessimist. According to Jules-Rosette (2002) and Weate (2003), it failed to point out the creativity of local intellectuals, artists, entrepreneurs and leaders of civil society. Karlström (2003) found that Mbembe's dystopia ignored the potential of traditional gift ceremonies and back-stage palaver to render politicians beholden. It is striking that these authors screened Mbembe's diagnosis for its political position and not for its sensitizing effect on the audience (on themselves, for a start). A shift in focus from discursive content to its experiential effect would be in keeping with African traditions of lore where the author's position comes second. It would be in keeping with anywhere in the world where a show of correctness is known not to serve the cause. A rapper listing possibly valid reasons for being hopeful amid surrounding misery may earn credit from the academic world. To hip-hop fans (popular culture being more demanding than academics), his or her list will more probably sound pathetic, if not sarcastic. Compare the many NGO adverts in Africa on condom use meant to show the good example. Tanzanian rappers instead describe in graphic detail the fate of those who do not use condoms. In the local Bantu language of Kisukuma, Bob Haisa sings that condom-free sex is not like tea or porridge, from which he could easily abstain, but is desire mutually reinforced by lovers finding themselves 'at an intersection where both sides are salivating for it in their own liquid' (*alaho ha nzilamaka buli ng'wene akuswilaga lusona*). The bare facts are stated. The choice is left to the listener.

The first section of this article explores whether Bongo Flava besides reflecting public discourse also determines it. The impact of music on society is hard to measure, but a few observations can be made on how artists have strengthened the country's freedom of speech, while being unhindered by the factors that typically mitigate political

² This postcolonial layer was lacking in the discussion of Ferguson (2002) and in the comments by Fabian and Gable, on two Guinean schoolboys who died in the landing gear of a plane bound for Brussels. Their letter requesting to mimic Europeans, 'to become like you in Africa', was more than a plea for membership in the 'New World society' (indeed reminding anthropologists that attractive explanations in terms of local custom or anti-colonial parody actually obscure the economic issue of inequality; Ferguson 2002: 552). It was a suicide note expressive of the postcolonial impasse: since colonization, the West possesses things and knowledge that Africans need in order to make it in their own society.

messages in Western popular culture. A key moment has been the hit song of Professor Jay on how the masses playfully grant their consent to dubious leadership. Could their complicity be affected simply by representing it in a song? Historically unique for Tanzania, a group of authors recognizable by age and musical interest think it can, and have carved out a critical position with a nation-wide reputation. Introducing some of their most successful work,³ I hope to demonstrate that this far from evident position has been possible thanks to the lyrics touching the right chord for an extraordinarily diverse audience ranging from peers and street kids to elders and politicians. That chord consists in mastering the immunizing strategy of postcolonial survivors while 'boiling the brains', that is, preventing this strategy from 'eating' the future.

LOCAL IMPACT AND GLOBAL RELEVANCE

Tanzanian hip-hop has across a diversity of themes made maximum use of the freedom of expression sparked by the first multi-party elections of 1995. Not that this freedom had been explicitly denied. Since independence, the single party had organized democratic elections to select members of parliament, and until the mid-1970s high emphasis was placed on their accountability to civilians (which would partly explain the country's political stability; Dashwood and Pratt 1999: 243). But, as anywhere in the world, free expression dies out if not regularly applied. Bongo Flava has contributed to expanding it for society at large, and this by capitalizing on the national language of Swahili and on the fairly democratic reach of radio in Africa.

Bongo Flava's success and credibility in voicing something as unfathomable as the population's sentiments gave newspaper journalists a chance to experiment with opinion pieces. By quoting two major hits of Wagosi Wa Kaya, journalist Eric Toroka (2003) could present the population's exasperation over institutionally rooted corruption as a fact and thus proceed with his analysis. The song 'Nurses' (*Wauguzi*) from 2002 dealt with the lack of care and respect in hospitals; with the bribes expected at every step of the cure, which leave 'pregnant women to die at the doorstep'. The seemingly more trivial song on the poor results of the national football squad topped the charts in 2003, because it told about the misappropriation of funds by the national football association and players' resignation to this. Another song by Wagosi Wa Kaya caused controversy in their home town. *Tanga kunani* laments in close to 1,000 words of extremely varied text, slit into four minutes,

³ The selection is based on four Swahili tabloids issued weekly (*Ijumaa, Risasi, Maisha and Amani*), as well as radio programmes on Mwanza's Radio Free Africa and on Clouds FM. This article offers a snapshot in time, yet with the advantage of a clear picture emerging. The exercise begins around the year 2000 when Bongo Flava acquired a broad base of listeners and when any preference Tanzanian radio-makers may have had for English over Swahili rap had clearly diminished (cf. Fenn and Perullo 2000).

the downfall of a once illustrious coastal town: 'Tanga, what's there? Why has everything died there?' Aeroplanes, trains and boats now avoid the place, while Islamic rosaries and black veils are on the increase, the rapper observes. 'Some take boys against the wall, others pretend to be Swahili, but eat pork. We keep quiet, fearing the stick.' In the meantime, the rap provocatively continues, 'Boer' (*makaburu*) entrepreneurs take what they can in a five-year slot, with the local mine's airstrip pointing to South Africa. Significantly expanding the freedom of expression, their portrayal of Tanga further includes traders of Indian descent spitting from their two-storey houses on the underpaid road workers, who are told to use 'a silent hammer'. Free speech is a civil peacemaker that can become an instrument of civil war, Nyerere believed, and thus he introduced limitations, the main one being ethnic labels. The taboo is firmly entrenched. The country made its international reputation in fighting a neighbouring dictator, Idi Amin, who had stigmatized and expelled traders of foreign descent. Deliberately flirting with that taboo, Wagosi Wa Kaya intend to prove their passion for 'the real situation' (*hali halisi*) over and above any apologetic inclination that would sooner leave internal problems of racism and sexual aggression unmentioned or (like outsiders do) speak of creative deflections of funds when meaning corruption.

Although Bongo Flava combines hip-hop's main ingredients, such as the popular culture of urban youth, the use of slang and engaged lyrics without restriction of speech, it has followed a course fairly independent from the US scene. Bongo lyrics address not just urban youth but society as a whole. Piracy of audiotapes runs rampant and dramatically reduces profits in the sector but has raised access. As a growing number of young rappers find their way to recording studios, their songs are aired on the many privately owned radio stations that reach herders and farmers in the village. Sometimes tracks are introduced on tape with a staged interview or a play explaining the message to the uninitiated. The interest is not in *double entendre* or tongue-in-cheek. The voice mixed to the front, in a language, Kiswahili, that capitalizes on former President Nyerere's effort to reach the whole population, rappers recount concrete issues which listeners of all ages and strands can relate to. In the process, they familiarize the nation with street slang, highly allegorical and versatile. They thus continue a long-standing Swahili tradition of borrowing and inventing words that travel fast. As in the above-mentioned concept of *bongo*, meaning 'cunning' and 'Tanzanian', we have in the last five years observed public discourse increasingly converge with the hip-hop idiom.

The main difference between Bongo Flava and US hip-hop is the possible impact on the general population. This became tangible to me in the area where I worked when the tarmac road from Mwanza to Dar es Salaam was completed. From 2000, small commuter vans (*daladala*) began to connect, in their agile, unruly style, every village along the road as well as neighbouring communities at bikeable distance. Thus the gap was physically bridged with Mwanza's urban reality. From the very

first note, the soundtrack to that journey has been Tanzania's home-grown rap blasting from the van's overheated speakers. Not long before that, national radio stations were either playing the national party's choir music for uplifting the masses, or provided light entertainment to accompany the nocturnal escapades of the elite (Askew 2002). By chance, hip-hop's fury coincided in 1995 with an emerging culture of unmasking, which the first multi-party elections unleashed in newspapers, in radio interviews and, as I witnessed at the time, in street-corner debates spontaneously arising in response to suspicions of vote-rigging. That discursive arena benefited from a wave against censorship, as the government strained to prove its democratic vigour to the various international organizations that basically sponsored it (Gibbon 1995). But censorship is not the only factor that could have prevented impact.

Radio waves do not as a rule discriminate between the words of a political speech and those of a rapper's protest. The exchange between rap and everyday discourse reminds us not to take for granted the Western divisions that commonly mitigate the reach of hip-hop's message across society. In Africa, rap music is not normally gauged through the unspoken categories of low (versus high) culture, of layman (versus expert) on societal matters, or of black (versus white) music. In the West, African hip-hop carries a label such as 'world music', stashing an entire continent. Probably the most effective way to trivialize Tanzanian rap is indeed to label it as a subculture. This article too must cope with the expectation, perfectly understandable in the tradition of urban and youth studies, of describing 'the local scene' of hip-hop, with its colourful personalities, fashions and fanzine-like sensations. Urban sites transpiring some of that youth culture exist (Remes 1999; Gesthuizen and Haas 2000). But the fans form a heterogeneous scene, among others cross-cut by the popular barbershops where imported music is preferred over Bongo rap (Weiss 2002). I therefore subsume the scene under the phenomenon itself which is represented by the Swahili lyrics and the totality of listeners, most of whom do not care about the fashion side of the genre. The meaning of Bongo Flava does not coincide with a palpable culture waiting to be ethnographically delimited, like Juju music in West Africa (Waterman 1990), labour migrant songs in South Africa (Coplan 1994), or a situated urban youth culture. Despite its appearance as a particular African identity in the making, Tanzanian rap patently claims to deal with events constituting 'the times' rather than 'a place'. This claim of global relevance when rhyming about 'the world', 'people' and 'life' countermands the outsider's automatism of localizing Africans' use of such concepts. As the global dimension of modernity decomposes into specific cultural outcomes or 'modernities' (Gaonkar 2001), how to train the eye for the inverse, the local phenomenon of global significance? That question goes for all local forms of rap that have the politically assertive and multi-ethnic intentions lacking in the music genres anthropologists usually deal with (Gross et al. 1996, on the comparison to North Africa's Rai). The question concerns Tanzanian artists in particular, as the rest of this

article seeks to demonstrate, because their streetwise approach tries to outwit the ruling logic of self-seeking predation, which to my knowledge no Western philosophy has been able to defeat.

BREAKING THROUGH THE MZEE CODE: 'THE NEW GENERATION'

When exploring the impact on public discourse, we have to consider the one song that established for many Tanzanians, young and old, the link between Bongo Flava and protest. To pay respect to the elderly, Kiswahili speakers use the greeting *shikamoo* and may continue the conversation with the approving interjections *Ndiyo mzee* (Yes, elder). In the area of Mwanza, the custom has always been inextricably bound up with the language. Hence my surprise in 2003 when my approving interjections to a government officer were met with unease. What could have affected this set formula, this rare bastion of national culture? As it turned out, the culprit was a rap song with the same title, *Ndiyo mzee*, released a year earlier by Professor Jay. It associates corruption with middle-aged elders, situated in the parental generation. The grandparents eking out a living in the village are cherished as being of Nyerere's generation. Not they but an urban elite have misappropriated the code of *mzee* (elder) to obtain immunity reminiscent of chiefly status. The song *Ndiyo mzee* breaks through this hermetic code. To something as rhizomatic in Tanzanian society as bribery and the elder's impunity, the song exemplifies the fit counter-strategy, of weaving an equally broad web of metaphors lodging unease about certain formulas. Urban slang has meanwhile invented another term for the elderly, *dingi*, which has permitted Wachuja Nafaka to write the song *Dingi* about the elder's nocturnal escapades, leaving wife and children with a bit of money and expecting roast meat for it at his return.

Ndiyo mzee is conceived as a humorous theatre play staging a rally in which a politician promises the impossible to become elected. He praises the civil servants and police ('To each a helicopter!'), describes the massive highway system he will build and guarantees the farmers an income they will stare at 'open-mouthed as if caught in the act of adultery' (*midomo wazi kama wamekamatwa ugoni*). His promises are backed by the 'Yes, elder' cheers of the audience, until he is exposed by a rap singer, who – not unimportantly – can subsequently count on the same blind support of the masses. The song received much airplay and became a big hit in the national charts, probably because of its long-awaited mockery of the political caste.

As an enchanting tune fades in and a female choir in the background sings 'Yes, elder, I accept' (*Ndiyo mzee, nimekubali*), we hear the submissive voice of the master of ceremonies acclaiming the honourable host called on stage. To loud applause, the rap takes off:

*Oke oke naitwa Joseph Haule
Mwana Msolopogani.*

Okay, okay, my name is Joseph
Haule, child of Msolopogani.

<i>Nadhani nimeletwa niokoe hiki kizazi.</i>	I believe I was brought to save this generation.
<i>Mimi ni mwanasiasa niliyebarikiwa na Mungu.</i>	I am a politician blessed by God.
<i>Nimeletwa kwenu ili niwapunguzie machungu.</i>	I was brought to you to soothe your frustration.

As Costello and Wallace point out, the rapper combines the figures of street kid and prophet, recalling the trickster or troubadour (1990: 115). In the good tradition of the court fool, the singer Professor Jay gives his own name, Joseph Haule, to the politician. After all, 'saving this generation' is not an unfamiliar concept to the rapper either, who does not mind the irony. Then the politician sums up his credentials, of the 'old school' so to speak, and not without humour: besides divine support, a special certificate in ruling countries, 'more wisdom than king Solomon', and a keen eye for the global. As he receives the cheers he calls for, the setting acquires the allure of a small-town bar where men plot and women are paid to admire them. Haule continues in a more personal tone: 'Every barmaid will own a Mercedes. Aren't you happy then, my sisters? Yes, elder! Then continue to praise me with songs and choirs.'

The song mocks 'veranda politics' (Kelsall 2002) but not with the intention of promoting the formal system of parliament. The corrective value of informal politics (Pels 2002; Kelsall 2003) is not the song's concern either. Its intention, not unlike that of Mbembe's essay, is to consider society in its entirety and mock the ludic relationship and deeply rooted pretence that unites rulers and ruled (1992: 26):

<i>Nipeni hii nafasi, hamwoni hali ni mbaya.</i>	Give me this opportunity. You don't see how bad the situation is.
<i>Nataka kuigeuza Tanzania iwe kama Ulaya.</i>	I want to change Tanzania to become like Europe.
<i>Cha kwanza nitakachofanya nitafuta umaskini.</i>	The first thing I will do is to eradicate poverty.
<i>Wanafunzi mkafanyie practical mwezini.</i>	Pupils should do a practical on the moon.
<i>Kwenye mahospitali nitamwaga dawa kama mchanga, na</i>	At the hospitals I will dispense medicine like sand.
<i>nitafungua account kwa kila mtoto mchanga.</i>	And I will open an account for every new-born.

The mimicry of becoming like Europeans is in the same league as pupils having a practical on the moon. The chorus follows: 'Isn't it true that I bless you, my friends? Yes, elder! . . . And the situation will change? Yes, elder! And you will hold on to the muzzle, okay? Yes, elder!' The audience strikes us as painfully indifferent. Anyone familiar with Tanzanian society knows that they are not portrayed as credulous. On the contrary, as the main East African newspaper stated about this

'protest song': 'The people say "Yes sir" during the rallies so as to avoid trouble, but privately say such politicians are liars and therefore unfit'.⁴ In clear contrast, the young rapper incarnates the upcoming generation, which emerges from hiding and speaks up to confront people with what they are doing: 'I open the gates for the new generation. There's still a chance for those who were in hiding' (from the song *Jina langu* on the same album). Having learned that Nyerere's idealism did not pay off, people more likely chose to be 'muzzled' and accept the bribes. To return to the atmosphere at the bar, corruption presents no threat as long as one concurs with it. The listener has been let in on an instance of postcolonial survival.

On the one hand, the epithet 'new generation' (*kizazi kipya*) helps the composers in questioning the generation in charge. In addition, 'new' indirectly signals the possibility of human agency, thus countering resignation to macro-social processes of ongoing decline. On the other hand, the 'new generation' seeks no return to Nyerere's days when music choirs were to stimulate a national culture according to official policy (as Haule requested from the barmaids). Moreover, Professor – notice the superlative of 'the teacher' – Jay has been ironical enough to avert accusations of moralism by using the strategy he combats. He has avoided the comfortable position the sociologist Niklas Luhmann defined as the moral: 'Preferring a comfortable middle position, one settles down with the moral so as to obtain a position of tranquillity that is itself good and permits to distinguish all other things as good or bad' (1993: 996). At the finale of the song, guest rapper Juma Nature comes on stage to do two things. First he associates the ruling class with occult practices by uncovering the politician's use of magic to gain popularity. Then he lets the audience respond to his critical revelations with a mere variation on the chorus of 'Yes elders' the campaigning demagogue received earlier. To explicitly copy the person previously criticized is a rhetorical technique (which surfaces too in the interview with 50 Cent in the next section). The speaker makes a sacrifice that appears almost suicidal yet in the Tanzanian case is well taken, as it conjures the anti-social pretension of superiority implied by anyone claiming to expose the truth in defiance of the masses. The sacrifice immunizes, as we will see next. Is it because sacrifice lifts the speaker out of a diurnal role and endows his opinions with something more than rationality? That magical basis sought by demagogues is precisely what *Ndiyo mzee* discredits. Then, may we be witnessing here the modern concept of social critique in which a disenchanting individual opposes the irrational collective? That collective irrationality, I have argued, applies not to the complicity in *Ndiyo mzee*. A more appropriate model, more complex than that of high priest or modern critic, to interpret the work of some African artists and scholars may be that of therapeutic divination. The diviner is allowed to transcend the collective

⁴ Michael Okema in 'To protest, you only need some torn clothes', *The East African*, 24 December 2001, p. 19.

if speaking in the uncompromised terms of the ancestor and if stirring up extreme feelings of crisis the listeners can identify with and can use to motivate change for themselves (Stroeken 2004). The following section attempts to clarify this experiential transformation envisaged by rap music.

SURVIVAL STRATEGIES: PESSIMISM AND IMMUNIZATION

In 2002, Professor Jay completed his highly acclaimed album *Tears, sweat and blood (Machizi, jasho na damu)*.⁵ In the spoken intro of the title song, he explains the significance of these bodily fluids in Africa's pandemic times. 'Sweat' stands for street vendors and porters making much effort for little gain. 'Tears' refer to the growing contingent of orphans roaming the streets. 'Blood' are the victims of war and epidemic. The song describes how these bodily fluids are spilled because 'we' do not care about the future. 'We are living like eating tomorrow' evokes an illusion of immunity shared by the general population. Politically, economically and sexually, 'we' are killing each other. 'Wrongdoing to the point of shamelessness' marks the grotesque of postcolonial power (Mbembe 1991: 14). As there exists no moral imperative any more that would lead us to hide our crimes, the rapper concludes that the world must be coming to an end.

*Maisha ya wabongo yamekuwa
kama wanayama.
Hiki ninachosema kila jicho linaona.*

*Machizi ya mnyonge, kilio cha kila
kona.*

*Damu ya Mtanzania naona sasa na
hali ya hatari na kasi nayo [...]*

*Utu unatutoka; inapotokea ajali
majeruhi wanauawa na watu
waibe mali.*

*Nafuta jasho la mlalahoi, chozi la
mnyonge.*

*Nalilia damu ya Zanzibar wote
tuombe.*

*Jasho limeshamili kwenye uso wa
malalahoi.*

*Sauti inakauka kwenye koo la
tan-boy.*

Tunaishi kama kula kesho.

The life of Tanzanians has become
like that of animals.

What I am saying, every eye is
seeing.

Tears of the helpless, death in
every corner.

Blood of the Tanzanian I now see
in an intense state of danger
[...]

Humanity is deserting us; when an
accident occurs the wounded
are killed for their money.

I dry off the sweat of the street
porter, the tear of the extorted.

I cry over the blood of Zanzibar,
all pray.

Sweat sticks to the face of the
street porter.

The voice dries up in the throat of
the bus-tout.

[Chorus:]

We are living like eating tomorrow.

⁵ He is a founding member of Hard Blasters, was formerly known as Nigga J, and was voted rapper of the year 2002 and 2004 in the Bongo Explosions poll organized by the weekly *Ijumaa*.

*Ni amani kwa yatima, kina mama,
watoto wenye mateso.
Machizi, jasho na damu kwa
Watanzania.
Na wote turwe pamoja tusali kwa nia.*

Tunauana kama kula kesho [...]

*Mkutano wa Beijing ungefanyika
kijijini labda na bibi yangu naye
angekuwemo kundini misaada
haipati inaishia mitini.*

*Tajiri anaongezewa inakuwa vipi
kwa masikini [...]
Siasa ya kibongo imeanza kunuka
damu.
ndugu watanzania wanauana kwa
zamu.
nani atakayezoa damu
inayomwagika?
Nyerere alitabiri kwamba
tutaadhirika.
Siasa sio mchezo kama karata tatu.*

*Jaziba inapopanda inang'oa mioyo
ya watu.
Mishale na mikuki imetawala
Kilosa,
Askari na wananchi wanauawa bila
makosa [...]*

*Watu wanapofanya maovu bila
vijicho Ndio unagundua dunia
yafika mwisho.*

*Jasho la mlalahoi linazidi
kuchuruzika.*

*Na upande wa pili vigogo
wanainuka rushwa.*

*Nakuta kundi la watoto kwenye
mitaa.*

*Waniulize wanadai wanaganga
njaa.*

*Tufumbe macho tusadiki tumwombe
Alah.*

Serikali imelala na haya si masihara.

*Wengi wanaacha shule, wengi
wanakuwa malaya.*

*Wengi wanakuwa wezi na wengi
wanafuata mabaya.*

*Ni nani atakayelisha yatima kwenye
mitaa?*

It's peace for the orphans, dear
mothers, children in pain.
Tears, sweat and blood for the
Tanzanians.

Let us stick together and pray
hard.

We are killing each other like
eating tomorrow. [...]

If only the Beijing meeting had
taken place in the village,
perhaps with my grandmother
in the group. Help does not
arrive, gets stuck up the trees.
The rich get more, how about the
poor? [...]

Tanzanian politics have begun to
smell like blood.

Tanzanian brothers killing each
other in turns.

Who will collect the blood spilled?

Nyerere foretold that we would
put him to shame.

Politics is no game like market
gambling.

As passions run high, people lose
their minds.

Arrows and spears have ruled
Kilosa,

police and civilians are killed
without reason. [...]

When people do harm without
hiding, then you know the world
has come to an end.

The sweat of the porter continues
to trickle down.

On the other side the powerful
raise the bribes.

I encounter gangs of children in
the street.

They charge me, they're fighting
hunger.

Let's close our eyes, believe and
beg to Allah.

The government has dozed off and
that's no joke.

Many leave school, many become
prostitutes.

Many become thieves, many do
wrong.

Who will feed the orphans in the
streets?

Nani atazuia ukimwi unaozagaa?

Who will prevent AIDS from spreading?

Nani atazuia vita na baa la njaa?

Who will prevent war and the disaster of famine?

Ee Mwenyezi Mungu epusha hili balaa.

Oh God Almighty end the tragedy.

Facing the impasse means to not transfer responsibility to a singular other. Concrete references are made to the government's role, for example in the clash between cattle-herders in Kilosa and in the killing of unarmed demonstrators in Zanzibar in January 2001. The nation's wealthy stay in the dark of the treetops and out of the limelight. But this is not possible without the consent of the rest of the population: the 'we' in the chorus suggests general complicity. The local hip-hop scene does not escape either. According to the songs *Clap your hands* and *Warning* from the same album, bands increasingly choose to entertain and 'sing without point' (*kuimba bila point*). It is explicitly stated that they are giving in to the commercial concerns one finds in Western mainstream music. Many rappers situate the epitome of commodification in the African city itself, where clever instincts (*bongo*) are complemented with schemes of deceit (*ujanja*). The duped are often Europeans unfamiliar with this advanced level of commodified relations. They are pitied with cynical interjections about one's compatriots and oneself: 'What has become of us?' or 'And that's Africa' (*Na hii ni Afrika*, from Juma Nature's *Nini chanzo*). The Europeans come from *majuu*, 'high up', in the socio-geographic sense, which also implies 'distant' from real life. Singing without point is close to real life in the 'culture of indifference' reproduced by the African city's restless buying and selling (Mbembe 2004). According to the culture of indifference, no contamination is destructive. Capitalism does not combat but markets any external alternative that is presented to it (Baudrillard 1999: 32). All over the world, that is how it became immune to destruction. Western critiques apply concepts such as the 'hybrid' and 'fluid' that obscure the materiality of the identities combined (Mbembe 2001: 5). They thus reinforce the illusion of immunity.

The prayer above to a directly intervening god pushes pessimism about humanity to the limit so that the listener can no longer stay indifferent. Following the example of rituals without author, the lyrics are composed to effect a transformation on the audience, rather than to bespeak an author's moral stance. What African artists such as Professor Jay are weary of, I contend, is to offer yet another utopia on top of the many prospects of liberation that have made up local modernities, such as the ideals derived from town and village life, school and tradition, nation and clan, office and patron, North and South, Christianity and ancestral beliefs. What causes indifference, I believe, is precisely the multiplication of differences that results in any political indignation inspired by one utopia being neutralized by another. (The reversal of terms can happen fast, as Mwanafalsafa's account of the West illustrates in the next section.) The Swahili word for rapping is *ku-kata*, to cut,

referring to the staccato style of singing. The verb is also used in the expression for decision-making, *kukata shauri*, literally 'to cut advice' or drastically reduce the plurality of views in a meeting. The reason that much of Tanzanian hip-hop exhibits no hope is that the artists are weary of presenting a signifier that captures the listener (who identifies with the speaker) in positive terms. If signifiers are 'cuts in the real' (Lacan 1973: 54), an excess of these will leave nothing of the 'real' of human experience, *in casu* the blood, sweat and tears the song referred to. A radical pessimism that dams the flood of signifiers has the effect of placing the listener in the position of making the first 'cut' that matters.

Who should be the subject of critique: government, capital, the West? The backdrop of Bongo Flava's pessimism is the history of African nationalism and its search for the real structures of oppression. The expanding search has culminated in this introjection of blame. Nationalist struggles for independence focused on the colonial administration, before discovering the role of metropolitan capital (Walraven and Abbink 2003: 4). In the 1970s, the newly founded states desperately tried to 'capture' the rural areas through educational and economic programmes, as exemplified in Tanzania by Ujamaa villagization (Hyden 1980). The subsequent decades were marked by growing disenchantment with the government. Under the structural adjustment programmes of the World Bank, the government became an increasingly opaque entity. Rap songs voice the perception in Tanzania that corruption spread widely after the present post-socialist generation took over from Nyerere, who voluntarily retired in 1985. The songs basically picture a nominal democracy of politicians keeping up personal allegiances, 'who use parliament to discuss their allowances instead of the nation's problems', as Juma Nature remarks in the song *Nini Chanzo?* (What's the cause?). The rhizomatic networks these politicians form with civil servants and privileged entrepreneurs, and even development experts as suggested in the reference to the Beijing world summit on women's rights, remain impervious to official campaigns against corruption. The network is sustained by moral sophistication. Chambua (2002) describes the power shift in the 1980s from elected representatives, obeying a socialist code, to capital investors who would eventually defend multi-party democracy at the expense of workers' participation. Tanzanian civil servants did not restore the balance. On the contrary, they became part of the problem. The state's resources dwindling, their obscure position in the bureaucratic chain became their main source of income. Following the leaders, they 'instrumentalized disorder' (Chabal and Daloz 1999). In fact, not much effort in instrumentalizing was needed. The disorder resulting from contradictory ideological 'orders' quite plainly legitimized a relativism that turned the self-seeking pragmatic into a bullet-proof philosophy of survival.

The indifference of the post-socialist generation to the normative project of visionary founding fathers tallies remarkably well with the position US gangsta acts such as 50 Cent nowadays take in relation to the founding fathers of hip-hop such as Public Enemy. The neo-liberal

pragmatic, as magnified in 50 Cent's album *Get Rich Or Die Tryin'*, has displaced the idealism of the first wave of rap bands. 50 Cent's motive is survival too – courtesy of the bullet-marks his body generously displays in video clips. Here, my previous analysis reaches its pivotal point. The gangsta rapper in New York and the postcolonial politician in Tanzania apply strategies of survival that are very much alike. I conclude that both *immunize* themselves against the threat of capitalist practices by embracing these. Better still, they seek contamination by capitalism to such an extent that the original (white) version looks harmless. Pursuing this parallel further between African American music and Tanzanian political history, I find their immunizing strategy to revive two traditions. The extremely coarse gangsta style is nothing less than the continuation of the hip-hop philosophy of appropriating a slur. The classic example is of rappers adopting 'nigga' as the term for friend, thus immunizing themselves against its offensive content and drawing extra power from the contamination.⁶ As for the postcolonial ruler, he inadvertently revives the tradition of the chief. The Sukuma chief had to prove his control over the witches of his chieftdom not by excelling in morality but on the contrary by going through the contamination of becoming a witch himself. In today's 'world coming to an end', these practices have become ordinary and universal, the rap above claimed.

Bongo Flava artists do not shun this strategy either, of empowering the critique by appropriating its very opposite. Think of the irony in *Ndiyo mzee* or of the negative formulation in the other songs we discussed: by sacrificing claims of morality, they keep their streetwise status. That status easily escalates into an illusion of complete immunity. The next section checks whether this is the case for gangsta rapper and predatory ruler, and argues that Bongo rap counters the danger by means of two principles freed from any moralizing that could jeopardize streetwise status: the duel and the credo of keeping it real.

DUELS AND BRAINS: STREETWISE PHILOSOPHY

Abbas Maunda, founding member of the first Tanzanian rap crew, contrasted the aggressive and ego-centred discourse of the US gangsta style with what he called the Tanzanian way, which is to keep the songs' accounts close to real life.⁷ The hip-hop credo of 'keeping it real' was introduced by the first wave of US bands and later adopted by local pioneer Mr II to insist on *hali halisi*, 'the real situation' (Gesthuizen 2000). The underlying critical spirit appears from the

⁶ In an interview with Pierre Slankowski (*Humo*, 22 April 2003, p. 181), American star 50 Cent similarly transcended any fixed position that could lose him street credibility. About police enquiries into his past, 50 Cent replied that the real gangsters are George Bush and his posse waging a war against a country for the oil reserves it has. But in the same breath he concludes: 'When I grow up, I want to be Bush'.

⁷ The interview with Abbas Maunda dates from the late 1990s and was read on 26 July 2003 at <<http://stockholm.music.museum/mmm/africa/highclas.html>>.

later version of the expression, 'boil the brains' (*chemsha bongo*). Both positive imperatives should be read negatively, as their purpose is to warn against the counterproductive illusion of immunity that underlies gangster escapism. 'Keep it real' found one of its earliest applications in the 1970s when black film-reviewers condemned the now legendary Blaxploitation movies for their light entertainment, their tribute to hedonism and especially their anti-heroes, the pimps and pushers of the 'hood. In Tanzania today, 'boiling the brains' confronts immunizing strategies in the field of AIDS that began with the neo-liberal shift. I expect future research on the wealth of local raps to offer more evidence that Bongo Flava really is the work of the first generation that grew up with a virus objectively undermining the belief in immunizing oneself.⁸

Equally effective as the hip-hop credo, in deserting the pretence of immunity, is the public duel between rappers willing to put their reputation on the line. Mwanafalsafa's *Ingekuwa vipi* (*What if*) for that purpose celebrates what he calls the *ngoma draw*, the duel. Opponents rapidly 'draw' rhymes at each other. The public chooses the winner. *Ngoma* refers to drum and dance competitions, famed by Sukuma groups. Dancing out conflict through collective participation has marked East African popular culture for at least a century. The Beni *ngoma* opposed Marini to Aranoti, representing the respectively 'posh' and 'ordinary' sections of coastal Swahili towns (Ranger 1975). A continuation can be found in the rivalry between the two football teams of Dar es Salaam, Yanga and Simba, which divide football fans across the nation. The Sukuma *mbina* likewise opposes dance groups of two medicinal traditions, Galu and Gika. Although sworn enemies, calling each other 'voracious' and 'devious' respectively, their identities are interdependent.

This sacrifice of immunity, of rivals challenging each other to come on stage and compete in rhyming, has marked hip-hop since its early beginnings. I argue that its attraction lies in curbing the intrinsic tendency discussed above. In Tanzania, the live duels are mostly attended by an in-crowd having the means to enter these special venues. Their significance pales before the popularity of recorded rivalry, as in the chain of songs and counter-songs by female hip-hop stars Sister P and Zay B. Mwanafalsafa's *What if* points to both the opposition and the interdependence: 'What would Sister P have sung if there had not been Zay B?' The prompt reply came from Sister P in a track released to drag him into the women's duel: 'What would Mwanafalsafa have sung without real artists such as myself?' Nobody escapes. What we observe here is not a competition to leave all competition behind, like the gangsta rising above all duels: 'Now it's clear I'm here for a real reason, 'cause he got hit like I got hit, but he ain't fucking breathing'

⁸ Since the early 1990s, an AIDS remedy myth has been heard among civil servants in highly affected Mwanza. It prescribed to either excessive contagion or having sex with the opposite of one's infected self, the proverbially innocent village girl. It may recently have found its match in the Internet phenomenon of so-called bare-backers seeking unprotected sex with HIV-positive partners.

(from 50 Cent's *Many men*) – Weber's predestined capitalist shining through. On the contrary, Bongo rappers do not seek to transcend the opposition and become immune to critique. The duel must go on.

What if seamlessly progresses from the concept of the duel to the claim that nobody occupies an ultimate vantage point. As rap poets Costello and Wallace (1990: 62) put it: 'Every travelogue is somebody else's home movie'. That claim can become a weapon deadening all further discussion.⁹ Here it boosts the discussion: 'What if Osama ruled the world? Not Americans but Arabs would be the vigilantes [*Sungusungu*] ... Arabs would be the ones enlightened and come out of the darkness.' Just as the listener discerns a protest against Western vigilantism during the build-up of the Iraq war, the song reverses the terms: 'What if the whites had not entered Africa? I think progress would have been late to arrive. Cars, planes, clothes, who would have brought these? And without the slave trade there would have been no black Americans' – and thus no hip-hop. This complex stance is what I understand by postcolonial indifference. Any attempt to rate the author on a moral scale has been masterfully foiled. At the same time, the elusive negation of judgement leaves the last word to the listener. The author avoids the tranquillity we cited earlier from Luhmann's definition. Mwanafalsafa, literally 'the philosopher', opts not for a new difference (added to the flood of 'cuts') but for a saturation of differences (the cuts polishing the surface, as it were) through reversal among others. This empowers the audience. The sheer number of those viscerally attracted to one side decides who wins the duel. We have no other basis to judge, *What if* indicates. Bongo Flava's acceptance of this unpredictable outcome attests to a realistic and streetwise status which challenges both the idealistic and subsequent pragmatic generation of rulers.

As anthropologists, we have little experience with critiques such as Bongo Flava's that are explicit and aim at transforming a mentality. Unspoken social discontent abounds in the literature, especially since Taussig's (1977) study on the transgression that plantation workers considered necessary to participate in the capitalist mode of production. The secret contract with the devil, to enter the realm of self-breeding capital and consumption, was a choice for excess, for mimicking sheer alterity in order to obtain its power (Taussig 1993, 1995) – similar to what I am suggesting of immunizing strategies. Tanzanians also develop an implicit critique of such neo-liberal strategies gone awry, for example through the concept of witchcraft to label excessive accumulation (Weiss 1998), or through alarming stories of people skinned and exported to Zambia as ingredients of magic (Sanders 2001). But in these cases desires of excess are equally implied, consolidating the capitalist mode of production. Bongo Flava artists such as Professor Jay break with

⁹ Since the late 1980s, an immunizing tendency seems to have dominated the social sciences: the critique that questioned their truth-claims has become part of the discipline. But what looks like a postmodern dance (Gergen 1994: 76) may be the search for a position beyond challenge, as in the case of the gangsta rapper.

the ambiguity. His latest album is entitled 'Real revolution' (*Mapinduzi halisi*). The political tenor cannot be doubted. The title paraphrases Chama Cha Mapinduzi or the 'Party of the Revolution', which has ruled the country since independence. The album features the sequel to *Ndiyo mzee* called *Siyo mzee* (No, elder). It further illustrates that rappers do not wallow in the margins but seek centre stage in public debate. The song recounts how the MP after his election deals with questions about his earlier promises. His answers are no longer hyperbolic. The lyrics quite plainly copy and discredit in the same breath the rhetoric of politicians that can be read daily in the newspapers.

CONCLUSIONS

To diagnose social ills and confront the establishment takes a lot of nerve, especially in Tanzanian society where the potential impact appears to be greater than in Europe or the USA. Some of that rapper's nerve we have seen to stem from a positive model of past leadership. Mzee Nyanduso, as Nyerere is known in street slang, had the soul (*moyo*, also 'heart') and the calling (*mwito*) of the artist; Professor Jay rhymes in *Yataka moyo*. Afande Sele coined a seminal expression when contemplating the future: 'I see far through my sharp telescope' (*Naona mbali kwa darubini kali*). Does divinatory vision ground hip-hop philosophy? Going back to the Jamaican reggae disc-jockey in the 1950s, who intuitively interjected remarks that showed the dancing crowd his grasp of their vibe (Toop 1991: 17), rap originated as an articulated form of speaking-in-tongues. Could such mediumistic grasp trump the sophisticated rationality that keeps neo-liberalism in place?

This article has illustrated the rhetorical strategy more frequently used by Bongo Flava. Rappers get the message across and combat postcolonial indifference by invoking the impasse. They criticize concrete practices and get away with it by including themselves in the critique, thus making their critique resistant by analogy with the biological process of becoming immune after contagion. This strategy sums up the streetwise philosophy, the school of life as it were, which survivors of the postcolony have in common. The strategy produces an illusion of immunity, however, which Tanzanian rappers show they control by public duel (on stage and on tape) as well as by the credo of keeping it real, locally known as 'boiling the brains'.

The local rap scene will undoubtedly change, as music promoters find the lyrics too harsh. Try to produce videos for or dance to the bloodshed in Zanzibar. Kiswahili tabloids increasingly promote the more sexually orientated and non-engaged type of hip-hop called *kujigamba* (boasting). They present it as an advance following the Western commercial model.¹⁰ A host of development agencies, at

¹⁰ The Swahili weekly *Amani* praised Cool James's love songs under the heading 'Tanzanian stars do it Western (*kimtani*) style' (12–18 September 2002), meaning: without political concerns.

the other extreme, have been selectively attracted by hip-hop themes (Afande Sele recently toured the country for a malaria prevention campaign). Hence, more tracks will be produced that are respectively danceable or positively formulated. With the music further diversifying and marketed to subdivisions of the population, the factors mitigating the message can only increase. But in the recent past, my suggestion is, this music heard on the radio, on the *daladala* and in the streets has been particularly beneficial to Tanzanian society. This has been overlooked by studies on informal correctives to the ailing democratic system. When listening to Bongo Flava, we are witnessing a move towards explicit and encompassing social critique, which in part will have shaped the coming generation of Tanzanian politicians. That Bongo Flava has not yet earned the academic attention it deserves may be due to the Africanist's inexperience with trends warranting optimism. Negative portrayals moreover immunize themselves better against critique.

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ABSTRACT

Tanzania has in the last decade seen a vibrant form of hip-hop emerge that is gaining wide public exposure thanks to its political tenor. First, this article illustrates how rap lyrics reflect Tanzanian political history and in part determine it. Bongo Flava, as the local hip-hop genre is called, has gained credibility by reinterpreting Nyerere's normative legacy and by expanding freedom of expression in the country, while unhampered by factors that normally mitigate the social impact of popular culture. Second, the article

explores the global relevance of their social critique. Bongo Flava attempts to outwit the sophisticated indifference and neoliberalism of postcolonial rulers and ruled. Partly inspired by African American popular culture, many songs expose the postcolonial strategy of survival, which is to immunize oneself against the threat of commodification by fully embracing it, the contamination yielding extra power. The lyrics, in their irony and pessimism, exhibit the same immunizing tendency. However, this tendency is curbed by two principles that safeguard streetwise status: the rapper's willingness to 'duel' and the Kiswahili credo of activating *bongo*, 'the brains'.

RÉSUMÉ

Au cours de la dernière décennie, la Tanzanie a vu émerger une forme de hip-hop survolté qui trouve un large retentissement auprès du public par sa teneur politique. Dans un premier temps, l'article illustre la façon dont les paroles de rap reflètent l'histoire politique tanzanienne et la déterminent en partie. Le Bongo Flava, nom donné au style hip-hop local, a obtenu sa crédibilité en réinterprétant l'héritage normatif de Nyerere et en développant la liberté d'expression dans le pays, sans être gêné par les facteurs qui atténuent normalement l'impact social de la culture populaire. Dans un second temps, l'article examine la pertinence globale de sa critique sociale. Le Bongo Flava tente de déjouer l'indifférence sophistiquée et le néolibéralisme des dirigeants et dirigés postcoloniaux. En partie inspirées de la culture populaire africaine américaine, beaucoup de chansons dénoncent la stratégie de survie postcoloniale qui consiste à s'immuniser contre la menace de la marchandisation en s'y ralliant totalement, la contamination rapportant un gain de pouvoir. Les paroles, à travers leur ironie et leur pessimisme, présentent la même tendance immunisante. Or, deux principes sauvegardent le statut de musique de rue et modèrent ainsi cette tendance: la volonté du rappeur d'«affronter en duel» et le credo kiswahili d'activer le *bongo*, «le cerveau».

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